

## Erdoğan's "New Turkey": restoring the authoritarian state in the name of democracy

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## Erdoğan's "New Turkey"

### Restoring the Authoritarian State in the Name of Democracy

Günter Seufert

European and American commentators warn that Turkey is drifting back into authoritarianism, citing excessive police violence against demonstrators, restrictions on freedom of the press and internet, government interference in the judiciary, purges in the bureaucracy, and an anti-European policy shift. They note with astonishment that former prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was able to win the presidency on an increased share of the vote despite credible accusations of corruption, strife within the conservative camp and foreign policy failures. Erdoğan himself speaks of the "New Turkey" having succeeded the old, authoritarian Kemalist republic and brought forth a progressive democracy.

How broad is support for Erdoğan's *Justice and Development Party* (AKP) across society? What can be expected of the new government? How fundamental is the reconstruction of the political system, and what does it mean for the future of democracy? How can and should Europe respond?

Turkish and international observers agree that the election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as President of Turkey on 10 August 2014 marks a turning-point in the country's political development. The new president sees himself not only as the head of state, but also as guarantor of the will of the people. For the first time since the founding of the republic, it is asserted, the government, its policies and the personality of the president reflect the identity, the culture and the political inclinations of the population. And, it is also claimed, the cultural plurality of the population is acknowledged for the first time, as witnessed by the peace negotiations with the banned *Kurdistan*

*Workers' Party* (PKK). The "New Turkey" is said to have overcome the political tutelage that the old secular elites exercised over the majority with the backing of the army and the judiciary. The new regime, it is claimed, is therefore not only culturally authentic, but also democratic.

### Erdoğan's Electoral Success

Including parliamentary and municipal elections and constitutional referendums, Erdoğan's presidential victory with 51.8 percent of the vote was his ninth successive election win. His widely noted charisma alone cannot explain this prolonged series

of successes. What we are in fact seeing under Erdoğan is the conclusion of a long-term process in Turkish politics: the incremental integration of the conservative religious majority and the Kurds into the political system. Three military coups and the banning of 26 political parties are only the most obvious examples of measures taken since 1960 to exclude Kurdish and conservative Islamic actors from the Kemalist republic. Even the AKP only narrowly escaped prohibition in 2008 – at a time when it was governing with an absolute majority. Prior to 2007, the political influence of the generals through the National Security Council and presidential vetoes had further restricted the options of conservative governments.

Since the beginning of his career in the AKP, Erdoğan's political discourse has consequently revolved around "democratisation", understood as asserting the will of the conservative majority against the political control of the Kemalist elite. It was this project that gained Erdoğan his following across disparate classes, groups and regions and also found support abroad.

During the clashes over the plans for the Gezi Park in Istanbul in summer 2013 Erdoğan instrumentalised this established "democratisation discourse" to legitimise a blunt strategy of retaining power. Erdoğan has replaced the real decades-long political tutelage of the generals with an only imaginary political "tutelage of foreign powers over the Turkish nation and its government". This has enabled him to present authoritarian moves against the opposition and interference in the judiciary as measures in defence of democracy and directed exclusively against foreign agents and stooges, above all the cadres of the preacher Fethullah Gülen within the bureaucracy (see Günter Seufert, *Is the Fethullah Gülen Movement Overstretching Itself?*, SWP Research Paper 2/2014). He employed this rhetorical brandmarking exceptionally successfully in the run-up to the municipal elections at the end of March 2014 and also in his latest campaign for the presidency.

There are, admittedly, other reasons too behind Erdoğan's leap in support from 43.39 percent in the municipal elections to almost 52 percent in the presidential. Firstly, Erdoğan succeeded in uniting behind him the votes of smaller right-wing parties that did not put up candidates of their own, such as the Turkish-Islamist *Felicity Party* (SP), the Turkish nationalist *Great Union Party* (BBP) and the Kurdish-Islamist *Free Cause Party* (HüdaPar). A repeat of that impressive result is therefore not expected at the June 2015 parliamentary elections. Secondly, many supporters of the "left-wing" *Republican People's Party* (CHP) and the "right-wing" *Nationalist Action Party* (MHP) were unable to bring themselves to give their vote to the joint candidate of the two parties.

### **The New Government: Pro-European Gloss on Authoritarian Reality**

The new prime minister, former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, unveiled his first cabinet on 29 August 2014. A small sigh of relief was heard in Brussels, because foreign and European policy were entrusted to figures who are well-known in Europe. The new foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, served briefly as European Union affairs minister and was from 2010 to 2012 President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His previous post as European Union affairs minister was taken over by the career diplomat Volkan Bozkır, previously Turkey's permanent representative to the European Union. The appointment of the previous economy minister Ali Babacan as one of the four deputy prime ministers and the retention of Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister were also welcomed as both are regarded as competent in their field and unideological. Moreover, the new Government Policy Statement attributes the European Union central importance for the country's modernisation, seeking accession for the republic's centenary in 2023.

But the manner in which the new government presents itself to the population

speaks a different language that fits more with the many passages in the Statement referring to Turkey as a civilisation in its own right, quite starkly distinct from the European, with its own distinct “national values” rooted in Turkish Ottoman history. These inherent values of Turkish civilisation not only have to be renewed, it is contended, but must also be asserted throughout all state institutions, and the state must convey these values to the public.

With state and government working to culturally and morally homogenise the population, the “democratisation” deployed to break the power of the secular elite has been replaced by a new authoritarianism, this time in the guise of conservative religious identity.

After his nomination as party leader, Davutoğlu accordingly defined the AKP as a “cadre movement” that had appeared on the stage to revive and resurrect a deeply rooted state tradition rather than as the representative of the interests of large parts of the population. Under his leadership this “restoration” will be continued without interruption, he said. After assuming the party leadership, Davutoğlu declared that Turks would in future have to exercise their civil liberties within the constraints of a particular “moral formation” that was apparently to be prescribed by the government.

The ideology used to justify this authoritarian state and the restriction of civil liberties is a hotchpotch of Turkish nationalism, religious piety and enthusiasm for the pan-Islamism of Abdul Hamid II, the last politically influential Ottoman sultan. It is poignantly expressed in a recent propaganda video commissioned by the party to introduce its new leader. The film presents Davutoğlu as “the hope of the Muslim weary and burdened”, “true to the message of the prophet”, “descended from Ottomans and Seljuks”, the “long-awaited spirit of [Ottoman Sultan] Abdul Hamid II” and “trusted advisor to the leader [i.e. Erdoğan]”, working “for the umma, for the Turkish Muslim religious nation, and for Allah”. Erdoğan for his part likes to see himself in the man-

tle of Atatürk’s successor, likewise leading the fight to liberate his country from Western domination. In fact he believes he surpasses his predecessor in this respect, because his endeavours for the national cause always have the majority of the population behind them.

This mixture of nostalgic yearning for former national greatness, anti-Western nationalism and conservative morality cannot produce clear domestic or foreign policy programmes. But the “New Turkey” discourse establishes a new hierarchy of political identities, with the government seeking to secure a monopoly over central political concepts such as nation, national interest, justice, progress and religion. Government rhetoric holds up Erdoğan and the AKP as indispensable for the existence and future of fatherland and nation and discredits the opposition. Erdoğan and his circles have no qualms about labelling opposition politicians saboteurs, traitors and foreign agents. This all serves to legitimise curtailing rights and liberties and to secure power for the current government and the governing party.

From this point it is but a small step to open rejection of so-called European values and any orientation on Europe at all, as propagated by Erdoğan’s chief economic advisor Yiğit Bulut. As it has with Russia, Europe has undermined Turkey’s culture in order to expand its own influence, Bulut writes in the pro-government *Star* newspaper. The only way to new strength, he says, is to return to the country’s own tradition.

### **The Party: Our Programme Is Erdoğan!**

The ambiguity of the current AKP ideology and the vagueness of the policies that flow from it pose no difficulties for the party, which has handed all decisive decisions to its founder and former leader Erdoğan. “We stand with Erdoğan and his ‘New Turkey’ and against all who reject him and this ideal,” Yalçın Akdoğan tweeted on 13 August, at the time still Erdoğan’s chief political

advisor and today one of the new prime minister's four deputies. Erdoğan does indeed embody one of the central traits of the AKP ideology, the fusion of state and nation into a single entity, with Erdoğan himself, as both representative of the state and tribune of the people, at its heart.

Where a man and his vision become programme there is no room for consultation, not even for discussion. And the party organs do indeed have little say when it comes to defining the AKP's political positions. Members of party organs submit their opinions in sealed envelopes that are passed to the party leader. When parliamentary candidates are selected, their standing in the party is irrelevant. Prime Minister Davutoğlu, the new party leader, equates internal discussions with "discord" and "machination" and calls on members to come directly to him with their complaints. While an extremely powerful leader and correspondingly weak organs are typical for Turkish political parties in general, today's AKP represents an extreme in three respects.

Firstly, Erdoğan has surrounded himself over the years with a circle of mostly younger coopted advisors who depend directly on him because they have little or no following in the party and mostly not even a parliamentary seat. They include the aforementioned Yalçın Akdoğan and Yiğit Bulut. Bulut has no seat in parliament, Akdoğan only since 2011. Numan Kurtulmuş, also without a parliamentary seat, resigned his leadership of the newly-founded left-Islamist *People's Voice Party* (HAS) in September 2012 to take up Erdoğan's invitation to join the AKP, where he is now one of the four deputy prime ministers. Süleyman Soylu, former leader of the marginal *Democratic Party* (DP), was also enticed away by Erdoğan in September 2012 and is today one of the AKP's deputy leaders. İbrahim Kalın became Erdoğan's chief foreign affairs advisor in 2009, following the appointment of his academic mentor Ahmet Davutoğlu to the post of foreign minister; today Kalın, who also has no seat in parliament, is deputy secretary-general of the presidency. An-

other prominent figure without a parliamentary seat is Efkân Ala, who in December 2013 succeeded Interior Minister Muammer Güler after corruption allegations forced Güler and three other cabinet ministers to resign. Emrullah İşler, member of parliament since 2011, also joined the cabinet under the same circumstances and served as deputy prime minister in Erdoğan's last cabinet. This group of relatively young Erdoğan loyalists is set to advance into the cabinet after the June 2015 parliamentary elections and continue his policies there.

This will be all the easier owing to a second peculiarity of the AKP: At Erdoğan's insistence the party upholds a provision in its statutes restricting its members of parliament to three legislative periods. This will prevent 73 of the current 312 AKP deputies from standing again, including four current and former deputy prime ministers, 15 current and former ministers, the current and a former speaker of parliament and a large number of individuals who hold or have held leading positions in the party. If the rule remains in force, Erdoğan will by the 2015 election have rid himself of all the heavyweights in the parliamentary group who possessed the potential to form the core of an internal party opposition. Bülent Arınç, Ali Babacan and Sadullah Ergin have often been mentioned in this context. They would be as thoroughly politically sidelined as today Abdullah Gül, Erdoğan's predecessor as president.

A third peculiarity of the AKP is that its decision-making centre in the person of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan formally operates outside of the party and is thus immune to the influence of party members. Erdoğan has entrusted the running of party and cabinet to the triumvirate of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Yalçın Akdoğan and Numan Kurtulmuş, who have no meaningful base of their own in the party.

All this works to hinder opinion-forming processes and block participation by party structures in internal political decisions, and brings to a halt the very dynamic that generated the AKP's long period of growth.

In its early years the party addressed not only the interests of conservative Muslim groups, but also integrated many centre-right politicians, influential Kurds, individual social democrats, as well as strongly pro-Western Muslims. As the moderate opposition to the Kemalist state, the AKP enjoyed broad support among the liberal public. Today it is perceived in those quarters as itself wielding state power and quite prepared to turn authoritarian instruments against its opponents.

### **De facto Introduction of a Presidential System**

In his speech of 27 August thanking delegates after his election as party leader, Davutoğlu set the party an immediate goal of achieving a two-thirds majority in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, which would allow the party and its government to amend the constitution as it pleased. The primary objective here concerns the introduction of a presidential system. The fact that Davutoğlu sets this objective, working to weaken both the AKP-dominated parliament and his own government, to the benefit of President Erdoğan, says a great deal about the balance of power between prime minister and president.

De facto, Erdoğan's election as president has already transitioned Turkey to a presidential system, even if the constitution still provides for a parliamentary one. The new cabinet clearly bears Erdoğan's hallmark. His prime minister never tires of reiterating that his policies are guided by Erdoğan's vision. Nor does the president shy from publicly announcing the instructions he has given or intends to give his prime minister for dealing with specific political problems.

### **Interfering and Politicising: The Fate of Justice and Legality**

The reckless attitude towards the *spirit* of the constitution expressed in these actions is also echoed in treatment of the *letter* of

the constitution and other legal norms. Thus Erdoğan ignored Article 101 of the constitution, which stipulates that the president must sever any party membership and resign from parliament as soon as he is elected. Erdoğan retained both, made sure he installed Davutoğlu as his successor, and only resigned from parliament after he was sworn in as president.

In view of the forcefulness of the new power elite, there is a danger not only of erosion of the constitution and laws as constraint and corrective on the executive, but also of the same happening to the judiciary.

As soon as corruption investigations against members of Erdoğan's cabinet began in December 2013, his government applied pressure on the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (SBJP), the legally independent self-governance body of the judiciary. The government achieved changes in its composition and the transfer to other duties of the prosecutors and judges investigating the corruption cases, as well as by decree more broadly restricting the scope of investigations by state prosecutors. A hastily cobbled-together judicial reform and pressure on the SBJP to appoint tame judges secured the government influence over first and second-instance decisions affecting detentions and arrests. After the involved judges and prosecutors had been replaced it came as no surprise that the pending corruption cases against four of Erdoğan's ministers and his son Bilal were dropped.

As well as interfering in the judiciary, the government exploits low standards to politicise prosecutions. For example, the aforementioned cases were dropped on the grounds that the investigators had been involved in a plot to topple the government, and the original prosecutors and police found themselves facing prosecution. The charges against leading members of a football fan club that played a decisive role in the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul in summer 2013 were also "attempting to overthrow the government" and topple the political order. Here too, prosecutors politi-

cised the trial by focusing on supposed political intentions rather than concrete provable crimes.

Prime Minister Davutoğlu is also taking sides in advance of the upcoming election of SBJP members on 12 October 2014, saying following his election as party leader that he wanted to put an end to the judiciary's control over politics. In his latest statement Davutoğlu also claims that parts of the judiciary stand under foreign influence, which would appear to foreshadow further steps to shape the judiciary to the government's wishes.

### **A Stronger, Larger Intelligence Service**

As well as counter-intelligence, the *National Intelligence Organisation* (MİT) is responsible for both internal and foreign intelligence. It shares responsibility for domestic information-gathering with the intelligence services of the police, the gendarmerie and the general staff, creating long-running inter-agency rivalries and conflicts.

Until the mid-1990s MİT was regarded as the preserve of the military. The AKP government was the first to succeed in establishing a clear hierarchy of services and placing MİT at the top. Today MİT is a central foreign and domestic tool of the government. The negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan's PKK are conducted through MİT channels, and it remains responsible for coordinating official and unofficial co-operation with Sunni and Salafist groups fighting in the Syrian civil war. A move in January 2014 to seek a judicial review of these activities ended with charges against the investigating gendarmerie officers and a news blackout. MİT also arranged the exchange of 46 Turkish hostages for Islamic State prisoners, which took place on 19 September.

In May 2010 Erdoğan's advisor Hakan Fidan was appointed head of MİT. Between 2012 and 2014 his budget expanded by 40.2 percent; further increases are planned for the coming years. In the first half of 2011,

the government transferred control of Turkey's biggest listening post from the armed forces to MİT. Technical neglect and embarrassing revelations about top generals created the opportunity for this move, as part of the government's strategy of breaking the domestic power of the military. In response to investigations against Hakan Fidan for "running errands for the PKK", conducted by prosecutors close to Fethullah Gülen, the government in March 2012 rushed a law through parliament to strengthen the immunity of intelligence agents. And in August 2014 the service's powers were expanded to grant it almost unrestricted access to documents and archives of all government agencies, courts and non-state institutions. Its powers to conduct large-scale electronic and digital eavesdropping without judicial control were also expanded. The founding of a parliamentary committee to control the intelligence services, originally planned for April 2014 is still awaited.

### **Peace Talks with the PKK: Substitute for Democratisation?**

Apologists for Erdoğan's argue that his strong position is politically acceptable, because only he and the AKP are willing to lead the negotiations with the PKK to a conclusion. The eighteen-month cease-fire and the recognition of Kurdish identity, rights and demands achieved during that period, they say, represent important steps towards democracy and are the precondition for further progress.

But however true the theory that democratisation cannot advance without a solution of the Kurdish question, so problematic is the simple equation of greater cultural freedom with greater political freedom.

In the pre-Erdoğan Kemalist state the deliberate exclusion of pious Muslims, Kurds, Alawites and non-Muslims established a cultural monism that hampered or completely prevented political participation by all these groups. But the Kemalist state was politically pluralistic. Different political

parties had the chance to form the government, while the courts and veto powers like the military – democratically legitimated or not – constrained the power of the government. Erdoğan's "New Turkey" is undoubtedly culturally more pluralist than the Kemalist state, but ruled by political monism. Only one party has any chance to form a government, the judiciary's hands are increasingly tied, and actors that once enjoyed veto power are frozen out.

### Summary: Power Relations in the "New Turkey"

Unlike the government and the pro-government press would have one believe, Erdoğan's "New Turkey" is not characterised by growing democracy. Nor is the successful integration of the conservative Muslim population into political decision-making and the associated expansion of political participation attributable to President Erdoğan's "New Turkey". It is true that the AKP achieved both, but that process occurred between 2005 and 2011 rather than more recently.

The situation today is characterised by the consolidating power of one person and a concomitant relativisation of the influence of institutions without which democracy is inconceivable: the political parties (including the AKP), parliament, the judiciary, codified law and the constitution. Erdoğan stands outside the influence of his party, which however retains its hegemony over parliament. Following a series of purges the government has the bureaucracy and in particular the police firmly in hand. The weakening of the Kemalist ideology robs the once influential military of the possibility to mobilise the minimum of public support required for intervention in the political process. The press is, as amply documented, exposed to existential pressure from a government that is simultaneously tightening its grip on the judiciary. The intelligence service has been financially and technically upgraded gained expanded powers, and stands de facto under the authority of the president.

### The European Union's Dilemma

In view of the situation as outlined, it is very questionable whether Turkey still fulfils the Copenhagen criteria that were the political precondition for starting accession negotiations. This presents the European Union with a dilemma. Turkey is too important in economic, foreign policy and security terms for Brussels and the EU member states simply to forget about exerting influence on Ankara. But they cannot ignore the fact that the internal drive towards democratisation sparked by the rise of the AKP has exhausted itself for the moment. The period when it was sufficient for the Union to keep a willing Turkey at arm's length and administer the status quo is over. It is also a fact that the Union has failed to integrate Turkey in its foreign and security policy over and above the accession talks, however such an integration might have been imagined. European Union can only regain influence if it revives the accession talks.

Turkish support for EU membership has increased significantly, from 45 percent in 2013 to 53 percent in 2014. As this demonstrates, in a time of crisis for the Turkish political system the European Union can once again become the guiding light of democratic developments. Explicitly secular forces, the Alawites, and even parts of the religious conservative spectrum see themselves facing government repression. Against this background, European standards of fundamental rights, freedom of the press and the judiciary can again become the common denominator of an otherwise often uninspired and bland opposition.

One concrete step towards invigorating negotiations and injecting a new dynamic towards democratisation would be to exercise pressure on the government of Cyprus to abandon its blockade of talks on chapters 23 (justice and basic rights) and 24 (security, freedom and justice). Another could be to include demands for rule of law and transparency in the negotiations over visa-free travel and revising the customs union, in both of which Turkey has great interest.

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